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background notes

Oman

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs

June 1989

Official Name: Sultanate of Oman

PROFILE

Geography

Area: 212,457 sq. km. (82,030 sq. mi.); about the size of Kansas. No firmly established borders. The Omani coastline stretches 1,700 km. (1,056 mi.). **Cities:** *Capital*—Muscat. *Other cities*—Matrah, Ruwi, Nizwa, Salalah, Sohar. **Terrain: Mountains, plains, and arid** plateau. **Climate:** Hot, humid along the coast, hot and dry in interior, summer monsoon in far south.

People

Nationality: *Noun*—Oman. *Adjective*—Omani. **Population:** 1.3 million (est.). **Annual growth rate:** 3%. **Ethnic groups:** Arab, Baluchi, Zanzabari, Indian. **Religion:** Ibadhi Muslim 75%, Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, some Hindus. **Languages:** Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects. **Education:** *Attendance* (est.)—80% primary, 30% secondary. *Literacy*—20%. **Health:** *Infant mortality rate* (est.)—109/1,000. *Life expectancy*—55 yrs. **Work force** (500,000): *Agriculture and fishing*—60%.

Government

Type: Monarchy. **Constitution:** None.

Branches: *Executive*—Sultan. *Legislative*—none. *Judicial*—traditional Islamic judges and a nascent criminal court system.

Political parties: None. **Suffrage:** None.

Administrative subdivisions: One province (Dhofar), two governorates (Musandam and Muscat), and numerous districts (*wilayats*).

Government budget (1987 est.): *Revenues*—$3.6 billion. *Expenditures*—$4.2 billion.

Defense: About 24% of GDP.

Flag: Three horizontal stripes (broad white and green at top and bottom, thinner red in center) joining a broad red vertical stripe at the staff side; the national emblem (a *khanjar* dagger in its scabbard superimposed on two crossed swords in scabbards) is at the top of the vertical stripe.

Economy

GDP (1986): $7.3 billion. **Per Capita GDP** (1986 est.): $5,600. **Avg. inflation rate** (last 5 yrs.): About 7%.

Natural resources: Oil, natural gas, copper, marble, limestone, gypsum, chromium.

Agriculture (2% of GDP): *Products*—dates, limes, bananas, mangoes, alfalfa, other fruits and vegetables.

Fisheries (1% of GDP): Kingfish, tuna, other fish, shrimp, lobster, abalone.

Industry: *Types*—crude petroleum 600,000 barrels per day (last half of 1987), fisheries, construction, petroleum refinery, copper mine and smelter, cement factory, and various light industries.

Trade (1986): *Exports*—$2.9 billion: oil 90%. *Major markets* (oil)—Japan 53%, South Korea 17%, Europe 12%, U.S. 2%, other Asia 20%; nonoil: U.A.E. 37% (re-exports), Saudi Arabia 8% (re-exports), Asian countries 10% (copper, shellfish, fish), U.S. 3% (shellfish). *Imports*—$2.5 billion: machinery and transportation equipment 41%, manufactured goods 31%, food and livestock 14%. *Major suppliers*—Japan 14%, U.A.E. 19% (re-exports), U.K. 18%, F.R.G. 9%, U.S. 8%.

Fiscal year: Calendar year.

Exchange rate: .385 rial = U.S.$1 (1 Omani rial = U.S.$2.60).

Economic aid received: Oman is a net aid recipient; no precise information is available. *Major donors*—Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., U.S., multilateral aid organizations. *U.S. aid* (1987)—$15.8 million: Omani-U.S. Joint Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation; small reimbursed Federal Aviation Administration program. The U.S. Government, under the supervision of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is upgrading Omani military airfields.

Membership in International Organization

UN and several of its specialized and related agencies, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF); Arab League; Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); INTELSAT; Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Oman is a member of neither the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries Organization nor the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries.

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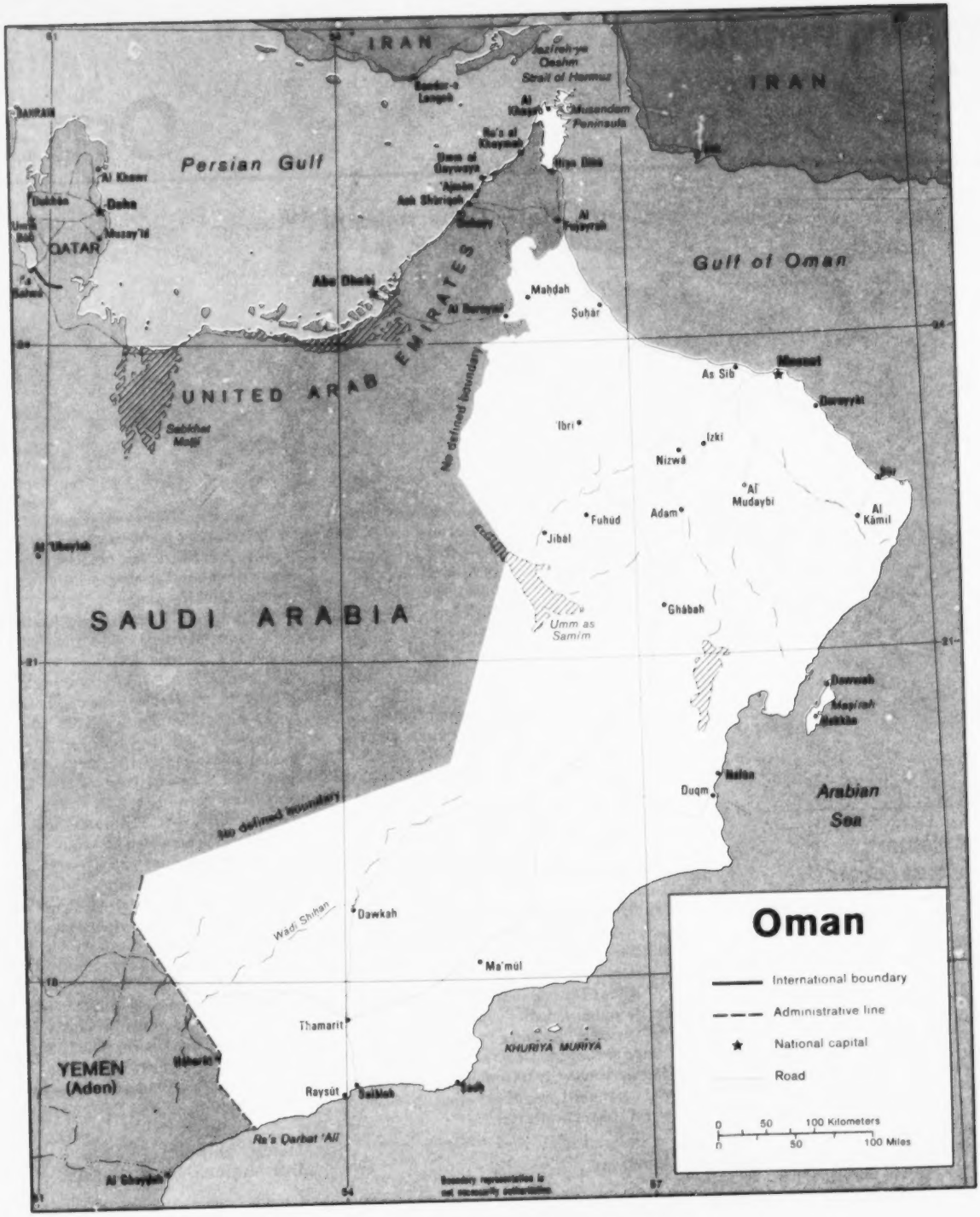

IRAN
Jazireh-ye Qeshm
Strait of Hormuz
Bandar-e Lengeh
Al Khasab
Musandam Peninsula
IRAN
BAHRAIN
Persian Gulf
Ra's al Khaymah
Dubai
Ash Sharigah
Al Fujayrah
Al Khawr
Doha
Umm Said
Musay'id
QATAR
Gulf of Oman
Abu Dhabi
Mahdah
Suhar
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
As Sib
Muscat
Sabkhat Matti
No defined boundary
Ibri
Izki
Nizwa
Sur
Al Mudaybi
Fuhud
Adam
Al Kamil
Jibal
Al 'Uwaylah
SAUDI ARABIA
Ghabah
Umm as Samim
Dawqah
Mashirah
Makkha
Duqm
Salalah
Arabian Sea
No defined boundary
Wadi Shihan
Dawkah
Ma'mul
Thamarit
KHURIYA MURIYA
YEMEN (Aden)
Hawrah
Raysut
Salalah
Sadh
Ra's Darbat 'Ali
Al Ghayzah
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative
Oman
International boundary
Administrative line
National capital
Road
0 50 100 Kilometers
0 50 100 Miles

GEOGRAPHY

Oman is located in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Its land borders with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are still undefined, while the border with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) is in dispute. The eastern side of Oman borders on the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean, providing it with nearly 1,690 kilometers (1,000 mi) of coastline. Oman's territory also includes the tip of the strategically important Musandam Peninsula, which is separated by the United Arab Emirates from the rest of Oman. This peninsula overlooks the Strait of Hormuz, the passageway for about 17% of the world's daily oil production. Oman's geography also encompasses the Island of Masirah, off the eastern coast.

The summer climate is hot and humid. Average low and high temperatures for January are 18 °C and 25 °C (65 °F and 77 °F). Humidity usually ranges between 60%–80%. Interior temperatures are higher, but the air is much drier. Annual rainfall averages 4–9 centimeters (1.5–3.5 in.), with wide fluctuations throughout the country. The coastal areas of Dhofar have a more tropical climate and fewer extreme temperatures than the rest of the country. Dhofar experiences a strong monsoon season from May to September, with frequent, heavy mists. Precipitation in several parts of the country is sufficient for cultivation by spring or well irrigation, but with insufficient technology, only about 0.2% of the total land is being farmed.

PEOPLE

About one-third of the population live in Muscat and the Batinah coastal plain northwest of the capital; more than one-half live in small towns, primarily in the interior; some 60,000 live in the southern Province of Dhofar; and about 15,000 live in the remote Musandam Peninsula on the Strait of Hormuz. Foreigners comprise about 25% of the population and 50% of the nonagricultural work force. At least 300,000 expatriates live in Oman, most of whom (180,000) are guest workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Jordan, and the Philippines.

Since 1970, the government has given especially high priority to education to develop a domestic work force, a vital factor in the country's economic and social progress. By 1987, some 270,000 male and female students were enrolled in 697 schools. Although the country's first university opened in 1986, many Omanis continue to pursue higher education abroad.

HISTORY

Although its early history is obscure, records show that Muscat and Oman (as the country was called before 1970) was converted to Islam in the seventh century A.D., during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Ibadhism, a form of Islam tracing its roots to the Kharijite movement, became the dominant religious sect in Oman by the eighth century. Contact with Europe was established in 1508, when the Portuguese conquered parts of the coastal region. Portugal's influence predominated for more than a century, with only a short interruption by the Turks. Fortifications built during the Portuguese occupation can still be seen at Muscat.

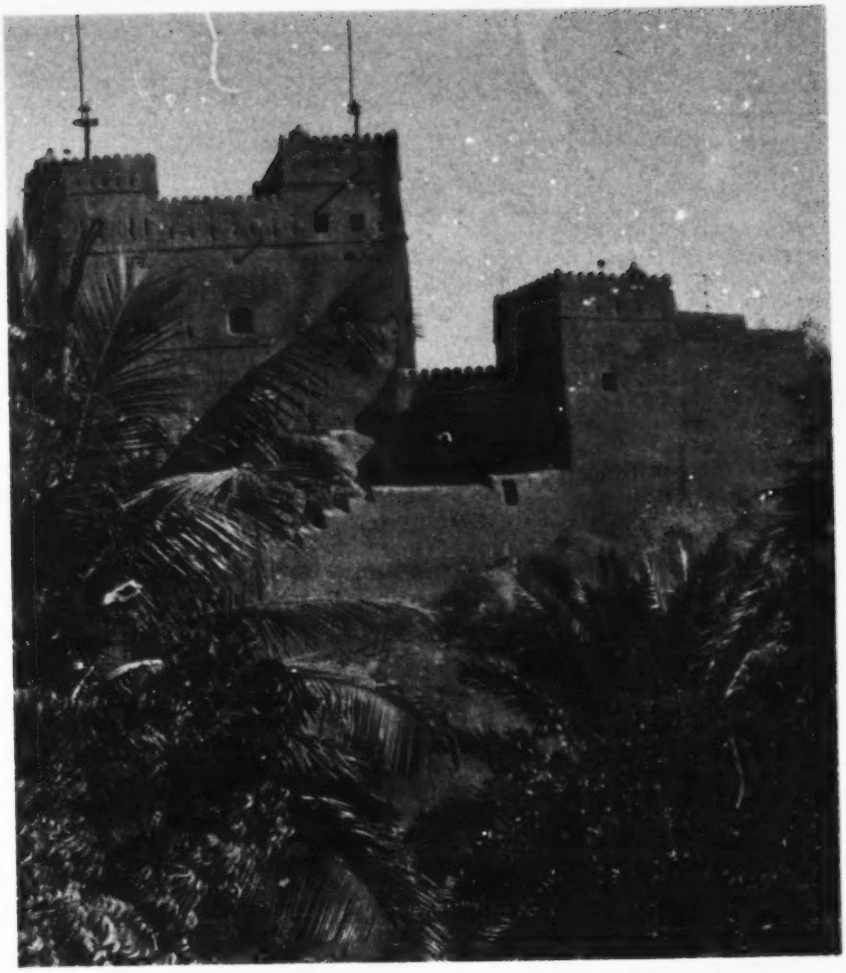
After the Portuguese were expelled in 1650 and while resisting Persian attempts to establish hegemony, Muscat and Oman extended its conquests to Zanzibar, other parts of the eastern coast of Africa, and portions of the southern Arabian Peninsula. During this period, political leadership gravitated from the Ibadhi imams, who were elected religious leaders, to hereditary sultans who established their capital in Muscat. The Muscat rulers established trading posts on the Persian coast (now Iran) and also exercised a measure of control over the Makran coast (now Pakistan) of mainland Asia. The last remnant of this holding, Gwadar, was ceded to Pakistan in 1958. By the early 19th century, Muscat and Oman was the most powerful state in Arabia and on the East African coast.

Except for a brief period of Persian rule, the Omanis have remained independent since 1650. Muscat and Oman was the object of Franco-British rivalry throughout the 18th century. The British developed a paramount position in 1798 through an agreement of friendship. Two years later, the Sultanate agreed to receive a resident British representative. During the 19th century, Muscat and Oman and the United Kingdom concluded several treaties of friendship and commerce. Their traditional association was confirmed in 1951 through a new Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation by which the United Kingdom recognized the Sultanate as a fully independent state.

Omani examines Khanjaro in the Muscat souk.

When Sultan Sa'id Sayyid died in 1856, his sons quarreled over his succession. As a result of this struggle, the empire—through the mediation of the British Government under the "Canning Award"—was divided in 1861 into two separate principalities—Zanzibar, with its East African dependencies, and Muscat and Oman. Zanzibar paid an annual subsidy to Muscat and Oman until it became independent in early 1964.

During the late 19th and early 20th



Fort Jalali, on the harbor near Muscat, was built by the Portugeuse in the 15th and 16th centuries.

centuries, the Sultan in Muscat faced rebellion by members of the Ibadhi sect residing in the interior who wanted to be ruled exclusively by their religious leader, the Imam of Oman. This conflict was resolved temporarily by the Treaty of Seeb, which granted the Imam autonomous rule in the interior, while recognizing the nominal sovereignty of the Sultan.

The conflict flared up again in 1954, when the new Imam led a sporadic 5-year rebellion against the Sultan's efforts to extend government control into the interior. The insurgents were defeated in 1959 with British help. The Sultan then terminated the Treaty of Seeb and voided the office of the Imam. In the early 1960s, the exiled Imam obtained support from Saudi Arabia and other Arab governments, but this support has ended.

In 1964, a separatist revolt began in Dhofar Province. Aided by communist and leftist governments such as South Yemen, the rebels formed the Dhofar Liberation Front, which later merged with the Marxist-dominated Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG). The PFLOAG's declared intention was to overthrow all traditional Arab Gulf regimes in the Persian Gulf.

In mid-1974, PFLOAG shortened its name to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO) and embarked on a political rather than a military approach to gain power in the other Persian Gulf states, while continuing the guerrilla war in Dhofar.

The present ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id, defeated the Dhofar insurgency in late 1975. Since then, Dhofar generally has been peaceful.

GOVERNMENT

Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id is a monarch who rules with the aid of his ministers. His dynasty, the Al Sa'id, was founded about 250 years ago by Imam Ahmed bin Sa'id. The present Sultan is a direct descendant of the great 19th century ruler, Sa'id bin Sultan. The Sultanate has no constitution, legislature, or legal political parties.

Oman's judicial system traditionally has been based on the shari'a—the Quranic laws and the oral teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The shari'a courts fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, Awqaf, and Islamic Affairs. Oman's first criminal code was not enacted until 1974. The current structure of the criminal court system was established in 1984 and consists of a magistrate court in the capital and four additional magistrate courts in Sohar, Sur, Salalah, and Nizwa. In the less populated areas and among the nomadic bedouin, tribal custom often is the law.

Administratively, the populated regions are divided into numerous *wilayats* (districts) presided over by *walis* (governors) responsible for settling local disputes, collecting taxes, and maintaining peace. Most *wilayats* are small; an exception is the *wilayat* of Dhofar, which comprises the whole province. The *wali* of Dhofar is an important government figure, holding cabinet rank, while other *walis* operate under the guidance of the Ministry of Interior.

In November 1981, the Sultan formed the Consultative Council for the State in an effort to increase public participation in the government. The council, whose members are drawn from the government, the business community, and the outlying regions, focuses on economic and social development and makes recommendations to the Sultan.

Principal Government Officials

Sultan, Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Finance—Qaboos bin Sa'id
Personal Representative of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos— Sayyid Thuwayni bin Shihab Al Sa'id
Deputy Prime Minister for Financial and Economic Affairs— Qais Abdul Mun'im al-Zawawi
Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defense Affairs— Sayyid Fahr bin Taimur Al Sa'id

Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs—Sayyid Fahad bin Mahmud Al Sa'id
Minister of State for Foreign Affairs—Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah

Other Ministers

Agriculture and Fisheries—Muhammad bin Abdulla al-Hinai
Commerce and Industry—Salim bin Abdulla al-Ghazali
Communications—Hamud bin Abdalla al-Harthi
Education and Youth Affairs—Yahya bin Mahfud al-Mantheri
Electricity and Water—Khalfan bin Nasir al-Wahaibi
Environment and Water Resources—Shabib bin Taimur Al Sa'id
Health—Mubarak bin Salih al-Khadduri
Housing—Sayyid Abdulla bin Hamad al-Busaidi
Information—Abdul Aziz bin Muhammad al-Ruwas
Interior—Sayyid Badr bin Saud al-Busaidi
Justice Awqaf and Islamic Affairs—Sayyid Hilal bin Sauod al-Busaidi
National Heritage and Culture—Sayyid Faisal bin Ali Al Sa'id
Petroleum and Minerals—Sa'id Ahmad al-Shanfari
Post, Telegraphs, and Telephones—Ahmad bin Suwaidan al-Bulushi
Regional Municipalities—Muhammad bin Ali al-Qutubi
Social Affairs and Labor—Mustahil bin Ahmad al-Mashani

Ambassador to the United States—Awadh bin Badr al-Shanfari

Oman maintains an embassy in the United States at 2342 Massachusetts Avenue NW., Washington, D.C. 20008 (tel. 202-387-1980).

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id assumed power on July 24, 1970, in a palace coup directed against his father, Sa'id bin Taimur, who later died in exile in London. The new Sultan was confronted with insurgency in a country plagued by endemic disease, illiteracy, and poverty.

One of the new Sultan's first measures was to abolish many of his father's harsh restrictions, which had caused thousands of Omanis to leave the country. He also offered amnesty to opponents of the previous regime, many of whom returned to Oman; established a modern government stucture; and launched a major development program to upgrade educational and health facilities, build a modern infrastructure, and develop the country's resources. The Sultan quickly gained popularity for his sweeping changes.

In an effort to curb the Dhofar insurgency, Sultan Qaboos expanded and re-equipped the armed forces and granted amnesty to all surrendered rebels while vigorously prosecuting the war in Dhofar. He obtained direct military support from Iran and Jordan. By early 1975, the guerrillas were confined to a 50-square-kilometer (20-sq.-mi.) area and shortly thereafter were defeated. As the war drew to a close, civil action programs were given increasing priority throughout the province and since have become major elements in winning the allegiance of the people. The PFLO threat appeared to diminish further with the establishment of diplomatic relations in October 1983 between South Yemen and Oman and subsequent diminution of propaganda and subversive activities against Oman. In late 1987, Oman opened an embassy in Aden and appointed its first resident ambassador to South Yemen.

Despite the government's success in quelling the Dhofar insurgency, regional tensions, including the Iran-Iraq war and attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, continue to necessitate large expenditures for defense. Twenty-four percent of the 1988 GDP was allocated to defense and national security. Oman maintains small but effective armed forces, supplied mainly with British equipment in addition to items from the United States and other countries. British officers, either on loan or on contract to the Sultanate, help to staff the armed forces. However, a program of "Omanization" is underway to increase the proportion of Omani officers.

ECONOMY

When Oman declined as an entrepot for arms and slaves in the mid-19th century, much of its former prosperity was lost, and the economy relied almost exclusively on agriculture, camel and goat herding, fishing, and traditional handicrafts.

Oil was first discovered in the interior near Fahud in the western desert in 1964. Petroleum Development (Oman) Ltd. (PDO) began production in August 1967. Its production is now owned 60% by the government and 40% by foreign interests (Royal Dutch Shell 34% and the remainder Compagnie Francaise des Petroles and Partex). In 1976, Oman's oil production rose to 366,000 barrels per day (b/d) but declined gradually to about 285,000 b/d in late 1980 due to the slow depletion of recoverable reserves. From 1981 to 1986, Oman was able to compensate for declining oil prices by increasing its production levels, which reached 600,000 b/d. With the collapse of oil prices in 1986, however, revenues dropped dramatically. Production was cut back temporarily in coordination with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but production levels again reached 600,000 b/d by mid-1987, which helped increase revenues.

Oman does not have the immense oil

Travel Notes

Customs: A visa or a "no objection certificate" is required of U.S. citizens for entry, and sponsorship by a resident of Oman is normally necessary. Visa application may be made at the Omani Embassy in Washington, D.C. Application for a certificate can only be made by the traveler's sponsor in Oman. Customs regulations prohibit importation of liquor, firearms, or pornographic material.

Climate and clothing: Wear summer clothing almost year round, but bring a sweater for the cool winter evenings. Because of cultural sensitivities, conservative dress is advised—no sleeveless tops, short skirts, or shorts.

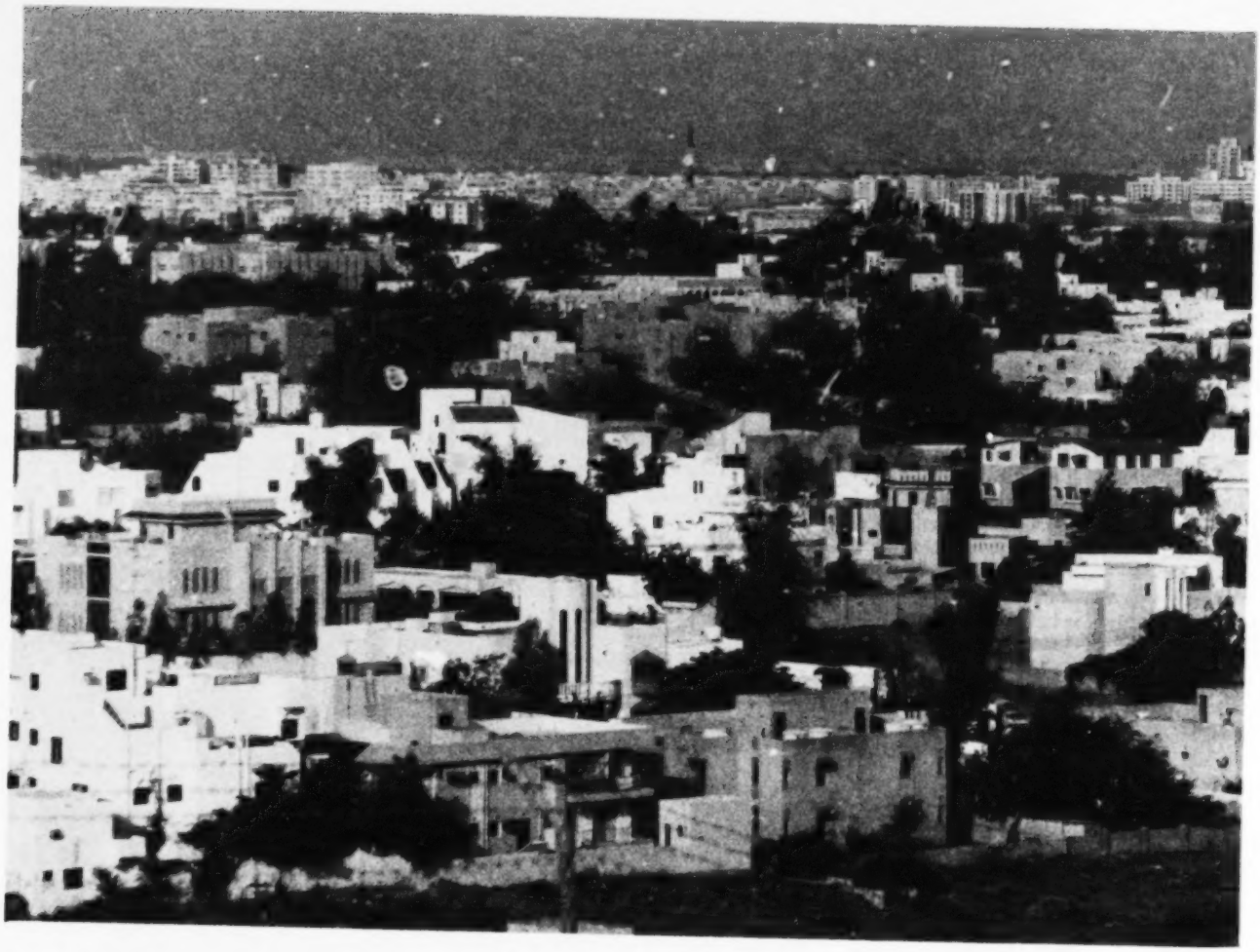
Health: Basic, modern care and most medicines are available. Typhoid and gamma globulin shots are recommended. Take malaria suppressants. Tapwater is not reliable.

Telecommunications: Telephone service is available in the capital area, in Salalah, and in several other towns. Telegraphic and telex service is available; telefax and mobile telephones also are available. Oman is nine time zones ahead of eastern standard time.

Transportation: Flights are available from several regional and European cities to the new international airport at Seeb, about 36 kilometers (22 mi.) west of Muscat. Taxis can be rented for the ride or by the day. Rental cars also are readily available. Driving is on the right.

Hotel accommodations: There are several international-class hotels in the Muscat area, but they often are heavily booked during the cooler months (October-April), and reservations should be made well ahead of travel. The Omani Government restricts tourism, but facilities that can accommodate tourists are being developed. Business people are welcome under proper sponsorship.

National holidays: National Day, November 18-19; Islamic holidays vary in the Gregorian calendar.



A view of Muscat.

resources of some of its neighbors, but they are the key to Oman's economy. Nevertheless, in recent years it has found more oil than it has produced, and total proven reserves have risen from 2.9 billion barrels in January 1982 to 4 billion barrels in late 1987. At current production rates, reserves would last some 20 years. The outlook for additions to reserves is promising, although Oman's complex geology makes exploration and production a challenge. Natural gas reserves, which will increasingly provide the fuel for power generation and desalination, stand at 9 trillion cubic feet. The Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals has made exploration for nonassociated gas a priority.

Agriculture and fishing are the traditional way of life in Oman. Dates and limes, grown extensively in the Batinah coastal plain and the highlands, make up most of the country's agricultural exports. Coconut palms, wheat, and bananas also are grown and cattle are raised in Dhofar. Other areas grow cereals and forage crops. Poultry production is steadily rising. Fish and shellfish exports reached $25 million in 1986.

The government is undertaking many development projects to modernize the economy and improve the standard of living. Increases in agricultural and especially fish production are believed possible with the application of modern technology. In the Muscat capital area, both a modern international airport at Seeb and a deepwater port at Matrah have been constructed. An airport at Salalah, capital of Dhofar Province, and a seaport at nearby Raysut also have been completed. A national road network is being built, including a recently completed $400-million highway linking the northern and southern regions. In an effort to diversify, the government built a $200-million copper mining and refining plant at Sohar. Marble, limestone, and gypsum may prove commercially valuable in the future.

Some of the largest budgetary outlays provide the basic educational and health services necessary to strengthen the country's human resources. The number of schools rose from 3 in 1970 to 697 in 1986, while hospital and clinic beds increased during this period from 12 to 2,800.

As oil revenues grew in the early 1970s, the government significantly increased its expenditures for defense and development and, in early 1975, found itself in a difficult financial position. Increased control of expenditures, financial

help from other countries, and the 1979 rise in crude oil prices greatly improved the situation. However, the subsequent oil price drop, combined with rapidly growing recurrent outlays and ambitious spending programs for development and defense have put the budget in deficit every year since 1982. The 1986 plunge in crude petroleum prices caused a record deficit, despite stringent efforts to cut back expenditures, which included shelving the 1986–90 5-year Development Plan. By December 1987, the government had released a scaled-down version of the original 5-year plan. Budget levels in 1988 declined slightly, primarily because emphasis was shifted from large to relatively small projects to achieve cost savings.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Under its previous ruler, Oman had limited contacts with the outside world, including neighboring Arab states. When Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970, only two countries, the United Kingdom and India, maintained a diplomatic presence in the country. A special treaty relationship gave the United Kingdom close involvement in Oman's civil and military affairs. Ties with the United Kingdom have remained friendly under Sultan Qaboos. Since 1970, Oman has expanded its foreign contacts considerably. By 1988, it had diplomatic relations with 87 countries, and 32 countries had established embassies there. For many years Oman avoided relations with communist countries because of the communist connection to the insurgency in Dhofar. In 1979, however, Oman exchanged ambassadors with China, and in 1985 it established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Relations with the Soviet Union were upgraded in 1987 when the two countries established embassies in each other's capital.

Oman is one of the most moderate Arab countries. It has supported the Camp David accords and was one of three Arab League states, along with Somalia and Sudan, which did not break relations with Egypt after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979. Oman also has supported the 1982 Reagan Middle East peace initiative. Oman has developed closer ties with its moderate neighbors, joining the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council when it was established in 1980.

Further Information

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U.S.–OMAN RELATIONS

The United States has maintained relations with the Sultanate since the early years of American independence. A Treaty of Friendship and Navigation, one of the first agreements of its kind with an Arab state, was concluded between the United States and Muscat in 1833. This treaty was replaced by the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights signed at Salalah on December 20, 1958, and proclaimed in effect on June 11, 1960.

A U.S. Consulate was maintained at Muscat from 1880 until 1915. Thereafter, U.S. interests in Oman were handled by U.S. diplomats resident in other countries. In 1972, the U.S. Ambassador in Kuwait was accredited also as the first U.S. Ambassador to Oman, and the U.S. Embassy, headed by a resident Charge d'Affaires, was opened. The first resident U.S. Ambassador took up his post in July 1974. The Oman Embassy was opened in Washington, D.C. in 1973.

U.S.-Omani relations were strengthened in mid-1980 by the conclusion of two important agreements. One provided access to Omani military facilities— being upgraded for mutual use—by U.S. forces under agreed conditions. The other agreement established a Joint Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation, located in Muscat, to provide U.S. economic assistance to Oman. In fiscal year 1987, $15.8 million in U.S. loans and grants were obligated for water resources, fisheries, training, and educational assistance. A Peace Corps program, which assisted Oman mainly in the fields of health and education, was initiated in 1973 and phased out in 1983. A team from the Federal Aviation Administration helps Oman's Civil Aviation Department on a reimbursable basis.

In April 1983, Sultan Qaboos made a state visit to the United States. Vice President Bush visited Oman in 1984 and 1986.

Principal U.S. Officials

Ambassador—Richard W. Boehm
Deputy Chief of Mission—Haywood Rankin
Chief, Political Economic Section—Anthony Benesch
Economic Commercial Officer—Henry Ensher
Public Affairs Officer—Jeffrey C. Thomas
Defense Attache—Col. James C. Lesseig

The address of the U.S. Embassy in Oman is P.O. Box 966, Muscat (tel. 738-006 008).■

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